

Benjamin Wilkomirski

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Benjamin Wilkomirski was a name which **Bruno Dössekker** (born **Bruno Grosjean** in 1941) adopted in his constructed identity as a Holocaust survivor and published author. His 1995 fictional memoirs, published in English as *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, were debunked in the late 1990s by a Swiss journalist.

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The book

In 1995 Benjamin Wilkomirski, a professional clarinetist and instrument maker living in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, published a memoir entitled *Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948* (later published in English as *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*). In the book, he described what he claimed were his experiences as a child survivor of the Holocaust. The supposed memories of World War II are presented in a fractured manner and using simple language from the point of view of the narrator, an overwhelmed, very young Jewish child. His first memory is of a man being crushed by uniformed men against the wall of a house; the narrator is seemingly too young for a more precise recollection, but the reader is led to infer that this is his father. Later on, the narrator and his brother hide out in a farmhouse in Poland before being arrested and interned in two Nazi concentration camps, where he meets his dying mother for the last time. After his liberation from the death camps, he is brought to an orphanage in Krakow and, finally, to Switzerland where he lives for decades before being able to reconstruct his fragmented past.

First publication

First published in German in 1995 by the Jüdischer Verlag (part of the highly respected Suhrkamp Verlag publishing house), *Bruchstücke* was soon translated into nine languages; an English translation with the title *Fragments* appeared in 1996, published by Schocken. The book earned widespread critical admiration, but nowhere was it as enthusiastic as in Switzerland and in the English-speaking countries, and won several awards, including the National Jewish Book Award in the United States, the Prix Memoire de la Shoah in France, and the *Jewish Quarterly* literary prize in Britain.^[1] The book sold well, but in contradiction to common belief it was not a bestseller. (Maechler, 2001a, pp. 111–128; Oels, 2004, pp. 376–9) Some critics even compared Wilkomirski to Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi and Anne Frank. He was invited to participate in radio and television programs as a witness and expert, and was interviewed and videotaped by reputable archives. In his oral statements Wilkomirski elaborated on many aspects which remained unclear or unexplained. For example, he

provided the names of the concentration camps in which he claimed to have been interned (Majdanek and Auschwitz), and added that he had been the victim of unbearable medical experiments. (Maechler, 2001a, pp. 22–83)

Ganzfried's article

In August 1998, a Swiss journalist and writer named Daniel Ganzfried questioned the veracity of *Fragments* in an article published in the Swiss newsweekly *Weltwoche*. Ganzfried argued that Wilkomirski knew the concentration camps “only as a tourist”, and that, far from being born in Latvia, he was actually born Bruno Grosjean, an illegitimate child of an unmarried mother named Yvonne Grosjean from Biel in Switzerland. The boy had been sent to an orphanage in Adelboden, Switzerland, from which he was taken in by the Dössekkers, a wealthy and childless couple in Zurich who finally adopted him.

Wilkomirski became a cause célèbre in the English-speaking world, appearing on *60 Minutes* and the BBC and in *Granta* and *The New Yorker*. He insisted that he was an authentic Holocaust survivor who had been secretly switched as a young boy with Bruno Grosjean upon his arrival in Switzerland. His supporters condemned Ganzfried, who, however, presented further evidence to support his theory. The beleaguered Wilkomirski could not verify his claims, but Ganzfried too was unable to prove his arguments conclusively. (Maechler, 2001a, pp. 129–164; Eskin, 2002, pp. 104–153)

Exposure

In April 1999, Wilkomirski's literary agency commissioned the Zurich historian Stefan Maechler to investigate the accusations. The historian presented his findings to his client and to the nine publishers of *Fragments* in the autumn of that year. Maechler concluded that Ganzfried's allegations were correct, and that Wilkomirski's alleged autobiography contradicted historical facts.

Maechler described in detail in his report how Grosjean-Wilkomirski had developed his fictional life story step by step and over decades. Most fascinating was his discovery that Wilkomirski's alleged experiences in German-occupied Poland closely corresponded with real events of his factual childhood in Switzerland, to the point that he suggested the author rewrote and reframed his own experience in a complex manner, turning the occurrences of his real life into that of a child surviving the Holocaust. It remained unclear to Maechler whether Grosjean-Wilkomirski had done this deliberately or if the writer actually believed what he had written, but he was skeptical that the writer was a “cold, calculating crook”, as Ganzfried assumed. (Maechler, 2001b, pp. 67–9) Amongst other things, Maechler revealed that a Holocaust survivor which Wilkomirski had claimed to have known in the camps, a woman named Laura Grabowski, had been earlier unearthed as a fraud, and had previously used the name Lauren Stratford to write about alleged satanic ritual abuse - a story which itself had been debunked nearly a decade earlier.

Maechler's first report was published in German in March 2000; the English edition appeared one year later (Maechler, 2001a) and included the original English translation of *Fragments* which had been withdrawn by the publisher after Maechler's report. Subsequently, the historian published two essays with additional findings and analysis (Maechler, 2001b, 2002), while Ganzfried (2002) published his own controversial version of the case (s. Oels, 2004; Maechler, 2002). The writer Elena Lappin (1999) and the journalist Blake Eskin (2002) covered the affair as well; Lappin published an extensive report in May 1999. She had become acquainted with Wilkomirski two years before, when the Jewish Quarterly awarded him its prize for nonfiction. At the time, she was editor of that English magazine. In the course of her research, she identified a number of contradictions in Wilkomirski's story and came to believe that *Fragments* was fiction. In addition, she reported that Wilkomirski's uncle, Max Grosjean, said that as children he and his sister Yvonne (Wilkomirski's biological mother) had been

Verdingkinder (or "earning children") - in other words, that they had been part of the old Swiss institution of orphaned children working for families, with overtones of child slavery. Eskin's interest in Wilkomirski had its origins in genealogy: his family had ancestors in Riga and, initially, they believed that the author of *Fragments* could perhaps be a long-lost relative. In the same year (2002) the public prosecutor of the canton of Zurich announced that she found no evidence of criminal fraud. She added that a DNA test she had ordered had confirmed that Wilkomirski and Grosjean were the same person.^[2]

Aftermath

The disclosure of Wilkomirski's fabrications altered the status of his book. The words are the same, but the work is not. Many critics argued that *Fragments* no longer had any literary value. "Once the professed interrelationship between the first-person narrator, the death-camp story he narrates, and historical reality are proved palpably false, what was a masterpiece becomes kitsch" (Maechler, 2000, p. 281). But for a few scholars, even as a pseudomemoir, the merits of the work still remain. "Those merits reside in a ferocious vision, a powerful narrative, an accumulation of indelible images, and the unforgettable way in which a small child's voice is deployed in an unfeeling adult world, during the war and thereafter" (Zeitlin, 2003, p. 177, see also Suleiman, 2006, p. 170).

The Wilkomirski case was heatedly debated in Germany and in Switzerland as a textbook example of the contemporary treatment of the Holocaust and of the perils of using it for one's own causes. However, the affair transcends the specific context of the Holocaust (see e.g. Chambers, 2002; Gabriel, 2004; Langer, 2006; Maechler, 2001b; Oels, 2004; Suleiman, 2006; Wickman, 2007). Wilkomirski's case raises questions about the literary genre of autobiography, the aesthetics of a literary work's reception, oral history, witness testimony, memory research,^[3] trauma therapies, and the like.

Books

- **Ross Chambers:** "*Orphaned Memories, Foster-Writing, Phantom Pain: The Fragments Affair*," in: Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (eds.) *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, Urbanan and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002, pp. 92–111
- **Blake Eskin:** *A Life in Pieces: The Making and Unmaking of Benjamin Wilkomirski*, New York and London: Norton, 2002, ISBN 0-393-04871-3
- **Daniel Ganzfried:** *Die Holocaust-Travestie. Erzählung*. In: Sebastian Hefti (ed.): ... *alias Wilkomirski. Die Holocaust-Travestie*. Jüdische Verlagsanstalt, Berlin 2002, pp. 17–154, ISBN 3-934658-29-6
- **Yiannis Gabriel:** "*The Voice of Experience and the Voice of the Expert – Can they Speak to each Other?*" In: Brian Hurwitz, Trisha Greenhalgh, Vieda Skultans (eds.): *Narrative Research in Health and Illness*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, ISBN 9780727917928, pp. 168–186
- **Lawrence L. Langer:** *Using and Abusing the Holocaust*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, ISBN 0-253-34745-9
- **Elena Lappin:** "*The Man with Two Heads*," *Granta* 66 (1999), pp. 7–65
- **Stefan Maechler** (2001a): *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth*, Translated from the German by John E. Woods. Including the text of *Fragments*, New York: Schocken Books, ISBN 0-8052-1135-7
- **Stefan Maechler** (2001b): *Wilkomirski the Victim. Individual Remembering as Social Interaction and Public Event*. In: *History & Memory*, vol. 13, no. 2, fall / winter 2001, pp. 59–95
- **Stefan Maechler:** *Aufregung um Wilkomirski. Genese eines Skandals und seine Bedeutung*. In: Diekmann / Schoeps (eds.): *Das Wilkomirski-Syndrom. Eingebildete Erinnerungen oder Von der Sehnsucht, Opfer zu sein*. Pendo: Zurich and Munich 2002, ISBN 3-85842-472-2.), pp. 86–131

- **David Oels**: *A real-life Grimm's fairy tale. Korrekturen, Nachträge, Ergänzungen zum Fall Wilkomirski*. In: *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, N.F. 14 (2004) vol. 2, pp. 373–390
- **Susan Rubin Suleiman**: *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*, Cambridge etc.: Harvard University Press, 2006, ISBN 0-674-02206-8
- **Matthew Wickman**: *The Ruins of Experience. Scotland's "Romantik" Highlands and the Birth of Modern Witness*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, ISBN 978-0-8122-3971-3
- **Benjamin Wilkomirski**: *Fragments. Memories of a Wartime Childhood*. Translated from the German by Carol Brown Janeway. New York: Schocken Books, 1996 (reprinted in Maechler, 2001a, pp. 375–496)
- **Froma Zeitlin**: “*New Soundings in Holocaust Literature: A Surplus of Memory*.” In: Moishe Postone and Eric Santer (eds.): *Catastrophe and Meaning. The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, ISBN 0-226-67611-0, pp. 173–208

References

1. ^ Holocaust Denial: A Sequel (<http://www.thenation.com/article/holocaust-denial-sequel>)
2. ^ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, December 13, 2002
3. ^ Daniel L. Schacter, *How the Mind Forgets and Remembers: The Seven Sins of Memory* Houghton Mifflin 2001, ISBN 0285636839. In considering the question "Is Wilkomirski simply a liar?" Schachter feels there is a possibility that some of his Wilkomirski's detailed recollections may have been a case of suggestion.

External links

- Why One Would Pretend to be a Victim of the Holocaust: The Wilkomirski Memoir (<http://www.othervoices.org/2.1/salecl/wilkomirski.html>) by Renata Salecl published in *Other Voices*, v.1 n.3, 2000.

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